

Mixed Force, With Thai 'Volunteers' Assist Unit North of Vientiane

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MUONG KASSY, Laos, Jan. 29—While the war in Vietnam may be sputtering to a cease-fire, the war in Laos continues.

Government troops, American-sponsored irregulars, armed children in uniform and American-paid Thai soldiers engaged as "volunteers" were today manning this major position lying athwart the gravel highway between the administrative capital, Vientiane, and the royal capital, Luang Prabang.

Lieut. Col Raymond Mullen, an assistant Army attaché from Belmont, Mass., said he was here as an "adviser" to the Government troops in this military region. A United States Embassy spokesman said that although the 80 or so members of the Army attaché's staff were in Laos as "observers," they also gave advice if asked.

Four other American officers and enlisted men, like Colonel Mullen in battle dress, assisted the colonel. An American Army helicopter with crew stood ready to take the attachés to forward positions.

Conversation Avoided

A bearded young American, wearing a military fatigue blouse over a blue-and-white striped T-shirt and slacks, landed in a helicopter and avoided conversation with visitors. The "case officers" of the Central Intelligence Agency, who chaperone the irregular Government troops, shun contact with outsiders.

A Thai officer wearing no insignia of rank identified himself as commander of a battalion of volunteers recently arrived in this embattled but beautiful region of jungle mountains, river valleys and craggy granite rocks. But though this land is as fertile as it is beautiful, its forests teeming with game and its rivers with fish, there is hardly anyone left but soldiers.

Muong Kassy, like all villages lying on Route 13 north of the town of Vang Vieng, has been under heavy pressure from the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces in this area.

The villagers who returned to Muong Kassy less than a year ago, after Government troops recaptured it from the Communists, left again earlier this month, when a Pathet Lao tank drove into the village, fired its cannon at the troop outpost and its machine gun into homes. It then retreated and was knocked out of action.

Col. Douang Py, a staff officer, said that he doubted the Communists would make peace in Laos until they had at least tried to capture all the territories that belonged to neutralist forces under the 1962 agreement that divided Laos into rightist, leftist and neutralist zones.

Muong Kassy, as well as Vang Vieng to the south and Sala Phou Khoun to the north, are neutralist territory.

Sala Phou Khoun, a jagged peak 18 miles to the north, overlooks the junction of the Vientiane-Luang Prabang road and the bomb-cratered dirt highway along which the Communist troops around Muong Kassy are supplied from the region of Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam across the Plaine des Jarres. The peak was recaptured by Government forces last Friday.

Colonel Douang Py said its defenders, reinforced by an irregular unit brought up from the southern panhandle of Laos last week by American helicopters, were girding for a counterattack. He said he did not think that any Government positions in this area could be held without American air support.

"If we lose air support, we lose all," the soft-spoken officer said.

More Air Strikes Expected

Colonel Mullen said that he had not been given official information, but he understood that the end of the fighting in Vietnam would make available more American air strikes in this country. He said, however, that there had been no American air strikes in this sector since last Friday and no B-52 raids "in some time."

"But if we see anything in this area, we've been told there's air available," the colonel said.

Colonel Douang Py said his troops and he himself hoped that the cease-fire in Vietnam had brought peace nearer in Laos, although there was no indication as yet that it had. "The country needs peace," he said, looking toward a cheerful soldier walking to a gun position. He was a boy about 15 years old.

"Go a little farther forward,"

the colonel said, "and you will see the really young ones, maybe 12 or 13 years old."

While Premier Souvanna Phouma and other officials express optimism about peace, the fighting continues. Last Saturday night the Government base at Long Tieng, the long-secret military installation maintained by the United States Central Intelligence Agency to help Laotian irregulars fight off the North Vietnamese, nearly went up in flames.

A Pathet Lao demolition squad infiltrated the base, 45 miles west of here, and attached explosive charges to aircraft and bomb and ammunition stacks. They were saved when the detonating mechanism, geared to hot weather, failed to go off in the mountain chill. Communist pressure continues on all fronts in the country.

"The troops keep asking me, even though I don't look like Henry Kissinger, if the war is going to be over soon," said Colonel Mullen.

"Without American air support it will be very painful for us," said Colonel Douang Py.

Air Operations Continuing

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 (Reuters) — United States bombers are continuing air operations in Laos despite the cease-fire in Vietnam, the Defense Department said today.

The Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, refused to give any details of the operations other than to say:

"We are continuing air operations in Laos in support of the Royal Laotian Government. We are doing that in response to some Communist movements in Laos."

Mr. Friedheim would not say what Communist activity the bombing missions were directed against, and referred reporters to statements made yesterday by William H. Sullivan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Mr. Sullivan said in a television interview program that in the period before a cease-fire was reached in Laos, the United States would continue to help Government forces resisting Communist movements there.

Mr. Friedheim said that the United States was not conducting air operations over Cambodia and that there were no military operations of any kind involving American forces in South Vietnam.